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ABSTRACT

A survey assessed teachers' understandings and beliefs about process writing, their instructional decisions for teaching writing, and the training and support for teaching process writing in their classrooms. A 19-item interview schedule was administered to 66 teachers from urban, suburban, and rural schools in upstate New York. Results indicated that the teachers understood writing to be a communication act. Although they used process writing as the basis for their teaching, many implemented and discussed it as a skills rather than a process approach. Instructional decisions appeared to reflect their thinking and beliefs about process writing. Teachers appeared to be at a skills implementation level in their understanding of process writing. (Three figures of data are included.) (MG)

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Assessment: Insights into Teachers' Beliefs and Practices About Process Writing

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Running Head: TEACHERS' BELIEFS

Abstract

A nineteen-item interview schedule was administered to 66 teachers from urban, suburban and rural schools in upstate New York. The purpose was to assess their understandings and beliefs about process writing, their instructional decisions for teaching writing and the training and support for teaching process writing in their classrooms. The results indicate that the teachers in this sample understood writing to be a communication act. Although they used process writing as the basis for their teaching, many implemented and discussed it as a skills rather than a process approach. Instructional decisions appeared to reflect their thinking and beliefs about process writing. The teachers in this sample appear to be at a skills implementation level in their understanding of process writing.

Assessment: Insights into Teachers' Beliefs and Practices About Process Writing

It is well established that instruction in process writing is important from the primary grades through the high school years. The work of Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) provide teachers with a theoretical framework for implementing process writing instruction. However, wide variation in translating theory into practice is evident among teachers (Mangano & Allen, 1986; Bridge, Hiebert, & Chesky, 1983). Research reveals that teachers seem to maintain their preset notions about writing conventions such as correct spelling, proper grammar, and neatness while attempting to incorporate process writing into the curriculum (Ray, Lee & Stansell, 1986). Thus, teachers' conceptualizations seem to effect the way writing is taught (Bridge, Hiebert, & Chesky, 1983).

Earlier studies examined teacher beliefs about writing. Three main points could be determined from these studies: (1) teacher reports regarding classroom practice could be depended on to be accurate (Bridge, Hiebert, & Chesky, 1983); (2) a relationship between teacher beliefs, instructional practice and their impact on student perceptions was found (Fear, Anderson, Englert, & Raphael, 1988); (3) wide variation in translating theory to practice are found among teachers. These studies revealed baseline information about teacher beliefs and instructional practices in writing as well as the need for further in-depth research. They also indicated that additional research is needed including larger samples than prior studies. Mangano and Allen (1986) recommend that assessment instruments such as interviews be used as data gathering instruments rather than a point scale technique.

Interviews have several advantages as assessment instruments. The interviewer brings his/her expertise to the interview and reduces the likelihood of ambiguity in questions and responses. Individuals' perceptions, attitudes and opinions can be clarified through interviews. Festinger and Katz (1953) state, "...if the focal data for a research project are the attitudes and perceptions of individuals, the most direct and often the most fruitful approach is to ask the individuals themselves."

In the field of reading interviews have long been recognized as assessment techniques regarding teachers' practices and beliefs (Harste & Burke, 1977; Duffy & Methany, 1979; Fear et al., 1988). Interview data has been instrumental in linking instructional practices with teacher beliefs (Swanson-Owens, 1986), teachers' knowledge structures and their organization of those structures (Johnson, 1986), and their philosophical beliefs (Harste & Burke, 1977). For these reasons it was decided to utilize an interview approach to data gathering.

In the past few years the trend towards process writing has received attention in language arts, reading and English professional journals, professional educational conferences and workshops. Preservice and inservice teachers in some geographic areas have received instruction in the teaching of process writing. New York and California are two large states that have adopted a process writing approach for school use. Other states such as Florida, Vermont, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Wisconsin, and Michigan support process writing in elementary and secondary classrooms. The effect of state support for instructional practices

in process writing, including teachers' beliefs, is not known. This study was undertaken to further understand teachers' attitudes, beliefs and their instructional decisions about process writing. The answer to three major questions were sought through the interview schedule: Category A, What are teachers' beliefs and understandings about process writing? Category B, What are teachers' instructional practices in writing? and Category C, What training and support is available for teaching process writing?

Method

A nineteen-item interview schedule, Teachers' Concepts About Writing, was developed by Lipa and Harlin (1988) to record and assess teachers' statements regarding their (1) beliefs and understandings of process writing, (2) their instructional decisions for teaching writing, and (3) the training and support within their school system. The interview form was administered by a trained group of graduate students from reading education courses to a sample of 66 teachers, grades K-7, teaching in urban, suburban and rural schools in Western New York State. Responses to questions were analyzed based on the above three categories: (A) teachers' beliefs and understanding, (B) instructional decisions for writing, and (C) training and support for teaching process writing. Category A responses were coded as primarily process emphasis or skills emphasis responses. Category B responses were coded primarily as management emphasis, instructional emphasis and/or motivation emphasis responses. Category C responses were coded as yes/no, and much, some, little.

Questions, based on the three categories, were developed for the

interview instrument. Teacher responses to each of the questions were read by four evaluators and coded as Category A, process/skills emphasis; Category B, management/instructional/motivation emphasis; Category C, yes/no or much, some, none responses. Consensus of the four evaluators was needed for coding answers such as process vs. skills (Category A). For example, Question 3 (What does a good writer do?) was analyzed based on process vs. skills emphasis responses. Answers that reflected the thinking, ideas and creativity of a writer were coded as process responses; answers that reflected the mechanics of writing such as punctuation and grammar were coded as skills based responses.

Responses to Category B, instructional decisions for writing, were coded as primarily management/instruction/motivation. For example, Question 1 B (What is the hardest part about teaching process writing?) was analyzed based on management, instructional and motivation emphases. Answers that reflected time and organization problems were coded as management responses; answers that reflected direct instructional procedures were coded as instructional emphases responses. Skills vs. process responses in this category were based on the same characteristics for Category A.

Responses to Category C, training and support for the teaching of process writing, required direct responses of positive/negative; much/some/none and percent of respondents replying to specific choices. The answers to these questions clearly belonged in one of the designated response modes.

Results and Discussion

Results were based on 19 questions; nine in Category A, seven

in Category C, and three in Category C. Figure 1 shows the frequency of responses to the questions in Category A, Teachers' Understandings and Beliefs About Writing. Frequency tabulations were transformed to percentages for consistency in reporting.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

What are teachers' beliefs and understandings about writing? The results shown in Figure 1 revealed that most of the teachers in this sample (94%) understood that writing was a communication act, a process, in which thoughts, ideas and feelings were expressed on paper. This viewpoint was supported by the teacher responses to other questions in this category. Questions which asked, What does a good writer do?, What is the hardest part about writing; the easiest part about writing?, What is a child's intent when he draws and labels a picture?, and whether teachers revise their writing were answered as process based responses by more than 60% of the respondents.

A second major question in Category A included showing teachers an emergent form of scribble writing, and asking them if this was writing. Primary and intermediate grade teachers differed as a group in their response to this question with 70% of the primary teachers indicating that scribble was writing and did communicate an author's message. Intermediate grade teachers were not as sure with 40% stating scribble was writing; 37% indicating it wasn't writing. Clearly, there was a difference between primary and intermediate grade teachers' perceptions

of what constitutes writing. Training and experiences with process writing may have helped broaden some views about scribble writing but many intermediate grade teachers view writing as legible letters with understandable content.

Another question within Category A was, "How is process writing different from traditional writing?" The answers differed considerably with almost equal numbers reporting about process writing in skill based terms, process based terms and others stating that they didn't know how they differed. At first glance responses such as "process writing has steps which have to be taught in sequential order" seemed like a process response. Further analysis of such responses as, "It is a series of steps which takes time and evaluation at each step" led to further analysis of such responses. Many respondents view process writing as "going through," "completing steps" but miss the wholistic nature of the process. These answers were considered skill based because the respondents appeared to have partitioned the concept of process writing into several discrete, linear steps, to be taught as separate steps out of the context of writing. Rather, process writing is based on a wholistic concept in which writers can use all elements of the process "at different moments or maybe the same moment" (Grasser, 1983). Teachers who viewed writing process as a series of discrete skills appear to have oversimplified the concept by viewing teaching strategies as "the concept." These teachers responded as if the process itself was fixed; it isn't! It varies with the individual and the task. At the same time this may reflect a stage in the developing understanding

by the teacher. Maybe teachers need a skills stage before complete integration of the concept is internalized.

Another question/response of interest was, "How do you (the teacher) know when a piece of writing is finished?" More than 50% of the teachers responded with a process based statement, e.g., When the message is complete, when I can't make it any better. However, these same teachers changed their responses when asked, "How do your students know when a piece of writing that they are working on is finished? Seventy-two percent of these teachers answered with a skills based response for their students. Some comments included the following: if it's OK'd by the teacher; when the first draft is written; when you come to the end of the page; when the five steps are completed. These responses suggest the need to examine whether teachers understand the concept of process writing or whether they are reifying the concept by teaching it as a skill and requiring products from students based on a skills interpretation of process.

In summary, most of the responses in this category reflected an understanding of writing to be a communication act. This was stated whether teachers responded to additional questions with a skills or process based emphases. Interesting shifts in responses to additional questions were noted suggesting that many teachers translate their beliefs and understanding about writing to a procedural, skills based communication act.

Category B

The second major category addressed in this interview, "What are

teachers' instructional decisions and practices in teaching writing," reflects the individual attitudes of teachers within their own classrooms.

Insert Figure 2 About Here

Forty percent of the teachers responded that managing process writing was the hardest part of teaching writing, while 55% selected instruction, namely one of the "steps", e.g., conferencing, as the hardest part. At the same time, instructional practices were also identified as the "easiest" parts of teaching process writing. Several "stages/steps" identified by some teachers as the hardest part of teaching writing were identified by others as the easiest. One item, motivation, stood out at the easiest part of teaching process writing. Individual differences were paramount in responses to this question. Broadly speaking, different aspects of instruction and management represented the diversity of teacher responses.

Teachers expressed their writing beliefs as well as their instructional decisions in their responses to the question, "If you were going to teach someone to write, what is the first thing you should do?" These answers, coded as skills/process, revealed that 67% of the teachers responded with a process response, e.g., get them to talk; get ideas, think; read to them; model writing. These responses seem to be consistent with the overall beliefs of this sample about writing.

Teachers reported that they included a scheduled writing time during the day. Fifty-seven percent of the teachers provided from

one-half hour to an hour or more time for writing each day. Including writing time to the instructional plan suggests that instruction in process writing has influenced teachers' curricula decisions. Given that 67% of the teachers reported that their children spent the writing time doing process writing activities, e.g., journal writing, writing folders, personal writing, writing workshop, also suggests that teachers are engaging children in writing activities that have been deemed as appropriate for process writing.

A majority of the teachers (59%) reported that they also engage in personal writing or instruct children during writing time. Of concern is the 24% of the teachers who engage in routine clerical or reading group teaching during writing time. Time-honored practices are still held by many teachers as they assign independent work time for children while they engage in clerical duties.

To summarize Category B, teachers' decisions and instructional practices reflect a strong tendency toward process writing activities. Approximately 25% of the teaches remain management or skills driven in their instructional practices. However, movement seems to be toward process writing strategies being implemented in the classroom. The information from the teachers interviewed in this sample suggests that teachers know what teaching strategies to use and the time needed for process instruction. As noted earlier, many of these concepts seem to be understood as skills or instructional formats developing out of a theoretical construct.

Category C

The final major question, "What is the extent of the training

and support for teaching process writing within schools?" reveals that 92% of the respondents had received some form of training in process writing. The major learning came from (1) inservice workshops, (2) undergraduate classes, (3) graduate classes, (4) conferences, and (5) professional journals. Generally, teachers were positive about teaching process writing with 61% stating their enthusiasm for it. Negative responses represented some intimidation or fear by the teacher to instruct in a process that they didn't fully understand. Many of the don't know responses revealed that they were not asked to teach process writing in their classrooms. This was a surprising answer, since New York State's syllabus presents the teacher with theory as well as instructional practices in process writing.

Fifty-two (52) percent of the teachers reported a highly supportive school system (superintendent, principal, reading teacher or classroom teacher). This support was considered a very positive aspect of their training and, in part, responsible for their positive attitude. Note that 48% of the group reports some/none or just doesn't know if they are supported.

Summary and Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the data. Most importantly, teachers seem to understand that writing is primarily a communication act. This was evident whether they had instruction in process writing or knew how process writing differed from traditional writing. The teachers in this sample were sophisticated in that most had received instruction in process writing and used strategies associated with process writing for instruction. Analysis of the responses suggested

that teachers' instructional decisions often represented a skills translation of process writing. These teachers seem to be confusing the concept of process writing with instructional sequences. Calkins (1986) describes process writing as a "process of craft" (p. 16). This sample of teachers appeared to identify and label the processes involved in writing as if they were "fixed and linear." Yet in practice writers can use all elements of the process at different moments, maybe at the same moment (Grasser, 1983). Are teachers in this sample confusing the concept of process writing with several instructional sequences?

Many responses seem to pattern "textbook" or popular statements about writing rather than the teachers' own thinking. The data suggests that teachers may be experiencing "levels" of depth in their understanding of process writing which may effect their instructional practices. Apparently, understanding and teaching writing process develops over time. First, a knowledge base provides an awareness of theory, principle, etc. With time and practice a skill level of understanding and implementation develops; finally, there is a refinement, integration and/or translation between theory and instructional delivery. Johnson (1986) states the following, "What influences teacher thought and action is the interplay between the context and the teachers' evolving organization of knowledge rather than their beliefs."

The teachers in this sample appear to be progressing nicely toward a level of integration between theory and instructional delivery. Teachers' beliefs and understandings about process writing do appear to reflect their instructional decisions. Does instructional and school

support help a teacher learn new concepts and translate theory into instruction practice? Apparently, yes!!

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Figure 1: CATEGORY A, Understandings and Beliefs About Writing

1A. What is writing?

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
6%	94%	0%

Process response: Writing is for communication, e.g., putting ideas and thought on paper for someone to read.

2A. How is process writing different from traditional writing?

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
36%	34%	28%

Skills response: A new name for reworking compositions; process writing includes steps which are taught separately.

Process response: Process writing includes writing and editing rather than grammar; ideas to skills rather than skills to ideas; individual and developmental; emphasis is on "how to" rather than on product; child-centered rather than teacher-centered; more interesting.

3A. What does a good writer do?

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
9%	71%	18%

Skills response: Incorporates skills such as punctuation, grammar; uses the mechanics of writing; neat; uses the steps of the writing process; uses a writing checklist; looks words up in the dictionary.

Process response: A good writer has good ideas, good vocabulary, polishes ones ideas; has a sense of audience; has clarity of thought and expression; is a risk taker; a good observer, good reader, good listener.

4A. **Show scribble writing. Is this writing? Why/why not?**

Primary Teachers			Intermediate Teachers		
Yes	No	DK	Yes	No	DK
70%	8%.	22%	40%	37%	23%

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
24%	62%	14%

Skills response: Not decipherable; doesn't say anything; not writing.

Process response: It's an attempt to communicate; express ideas; communicate for a special audience.

5A. **Show drawn picture with labeling. What is this writer trying to do?**

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
12%	72%	15%

Skills response: Get attention; identify objects, spell.

Process response: Describe the picture; illustrate feelings; express oneself visually and with words; clarify, tell a story.

6A. **What is the hardest part about writing?**

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
32%	56%	12%

Skills response: The time it takes to write; rule and grammar; physical coordination; helping children; edit, revise,final copy.

Process response: Organizing, getting the ideas, finding topics; communication/using the right words; creativity.

7A. **What is the easiest part about writing?**

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
18%	67%	15%

Skills response: Mechanics/penmanship; outlining ideas; editing; final copy.

Process response: Personal writing; getting ideas (pre-writing); maintaining the main ideas; expressing oneself; first draft; publishing and sharing.

8A. **Do you ever revise your writing?**

TEACHER		STUDENT	
Yes	No	Yes	No
94%	4%	71%	24%

9A. **How do you know when a piece of writing is finished?**

TEACHER		CHILD	
Skills Response	Process Response	Skills Response	Process Response
41%	59%	72%	28%

Teacher

Skills response: The End, Sincerely, sign, tired of it; corrections made.

Process response: Re-read and it's acceptable; last section has closure; message is complete; can't make it any better; confident and pleased/satisfied.

Child

Skills response: It's OK'd by teacher, don't know, first draft is written; if it's written they're done; come to the end of the page; looks long enough; completed the five steps.

Process response: Message is complete; if writing makes sense.

Figure 2: CATEGORY B, Instructional Decisions

1B. What is the hardest part about teaching process writing?

Management	Instruction	DK
40%	55%	5%

Management response: Very time consuming activity; organizing the classroom; giving up control/being an observer; lessening student inhibitions about writing.

Instruction response: Conferencing; revision, organizing thoughts, first draft, teaching children to go through steps, phonic applications.

2B. What is the easiest part about teaching process writing?

Management	Instruction	Motivation	DK
7%	49%	38%	8%

Management response: Process writing is organized and sequential (easy to teach); less planning and more repetition; more individuality/ less grouping.

Instruction response: Prewriting and brainstorming is the easiest part about teaching process writing; writing the first draft; the sharing experience.

Motivation: Motivating the children is the easiest part of teaching process writing.

3B. If you were going to teach someone to write, what is the first thing you should do? Why?

Skills Based Response	Process Based Response	DK
27%	67%	6%

Skills response: Teach words and objects; teach letters of the alphabet; teach the basics; teach reading.

Process response: Help them get ideas/talk/brainstorm/think; read to them; saturate them with others' writing; teach them to observe; interest them; model/write for them to show them how.

4B. Do you revise your writing? Do your students revise their writing?

Teachers		Students	
Yes	No	Yes	No
94%	6%	71%	24%

5B. How much time do your students spend writing during the day?

Less Than 1/2 Hour	1/2 - 1 Hour	+ 1 Hour	DK
14%	27%	30%	15%

6B. How do they spend their writing time?

Workbooks/Skills	Process Activities	Content Subjects	DK
18%	67%	9%	6%

7B. What do you do during regularly scheduled writing time?

Conference	Write	Other (Attendance, etc.)
35%	24%	24%

Conference response: Circulate to see what children are doing; guide them; listen; help them get ideas.

Writing: Teacher writes himself/herself to model; responds to children's journals.

Other: Lunch money; attendance; reading groups; teach printing; give extra help; check workbooks; "We do whole language instead."

Figure 3: CATEGORY C, What training is available for the teaching of process writing:

1C. How do you feel when your school district asks you to teach process writing?

Positive	Negative	Don't Know
61%	11%	28%

2C. How much support have you gotten for implementing process writing?

Much	Some	None	Don't Know
52%	20%	15%	12%

3C. Where did you learn about process writing?

Ninety-two (92) respondents answered that they had information on process writing.

A.	Undergraduate classes	33%
B.	Graduate classes	33%
C.	Preservice workshops	3%
D.	Inservice workshops	36%
E.	Student teaching	3%
F.	Professional journal	24%
G.	Conference	20%
H.	No information	8%